

# Student perceptions of group writing processes and feedback

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**Abstract.** In this pilot study, two second year writing classes at a university in Japan completed two group writing tasks using Microsoft Word and Google Docs. After both tasks were completed, the students (N=45) completed a short survey containing Likert scale items about their preferences when writing under the different conditions. Willing individuals also answered a second survey containing open-ended questions to gain a deeper understanding about the first survey results. Findings showed that the students preferred using Google Docs for the writing tasks due to ease of use and submission of the final document, as well as the ability to understand online written feedback from the instructor.

**Keywords:** L2 writing, group writing, CALL, Google Docs.

## 1. Introduction

Compared with communicative classes, writing has traditionally been thought of more as an individual task (Storch, 2005). However, with modern technologies, collaborative writing tasks are becoming more common place in the L2 classroom. These kinds of activities have the potential to aid students' task completion, where collaborative writing can result in more linguistically accurate texts (Storch, 2013).

Furthermore, applications such as Google Docs allow for greater ease of collaboration and implementation of writing tasks (Slavkov, 2015), as groups can work on one document concurrently, as well as record all efforts from contributors. Thus, it also helps to alleviate concerns about unequitable workloads from participants.

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However, how do students experience group writing tasks under a more traditional method, such as Microsoft Word, compared with online applications? This pilot study endeavors to understand which condition students prefer, with a focus on three key components: which condition they prefer to write under, which condition they prefer for submission, and under which condition is feedback easier to understand?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Participants**

Forty-five second year STEM<sup>2</sup> L2 English students from two classes at a university in Japan responded anonymously to a survey after completing two group essay writing tasks.

### **2.2. Writing tasks and survey**

#### *2.2.1. Writing tasks*

In small groups of three or four, students completed two group argumentative essays of about 1,000 words each during one semester. Both essays contained five paragraphs and followed typical writing format processes. Each group was allowed to choose a current issue in science or technology as a topic, and required to follow the faculty formatting guidelines for documents. Groups completed a brief paper-based outline in class for feedback from the instructor before writing commenced. Furthermore, all groups sat together in class to aid the flow of collaboration.

The first essay was completed using Microsoft Word. Each student had access to a laptop computer within the classroom. In order to support an equitable division of work, students were advised to divide areas of the essay to take primary responsibility for. However, as a group they were instructed to, and given time to, reflect upon the essay as a whole in class. A printed copy of the first draft was then submitted. The instructor checked and offered handwritten feedback, primarily indirect and metalinguistic. Groups addressed the feedback before submitting a final paper-based copy.

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2. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

For the second essay, the instructor created separate Google Docs for each group. The appropriate document was shared with each group member. Groups again completed an outline, before working on the first draft in class as the instructor monitored their progress through Google Drive. The instructor then provided feedback by adding comments to the document. Again, feedback was primarily metalinguistic and indirect. Groups addressed the feedback together and completed final drafts. Throughout the writing process students were reminded that the history of their document would be viewed to ensure all students contributed to the writing of the essay.

2.2.2. Survey

After both essays were completed, students anonymously answered a short survey containing six-point Likert items (1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree) in class. The statements focused on the three previously mentioned key components and took about ten minutes to complete. Respondents were instructed both orally and within the survey itself to consider all experiences when writing with both Microsoft Word and Google Docs while responding to the Likert items. Respondents were also asked to share contact details if willing to answer further questions. A second survey asking respondents to choose their preference between Microsoft Word and Google Docs under the three key components and then answer open-ended questions asking why they preferred each condition was sent to those who volunteered their details.

3. Results

Survey results were analyzed using SPSS 25. Descriptive statistic results show that students preferred using Google Docs for all three conditions (see Table 1). The mean in each case was between 4.5 and 4.9, indicating agreement on the Likert scale. Furthermore, the standard deviation of each result was between 1.1 and 1.3, indicating at worst slight disagreement or just mere agreement.

Table 1. Survey results

	N	Mean	Standard deviation
I think it is easier writing in groups using Google Drive documents	45	4.69	1.240
I think it is easier to understand and read teacher comments using Google Drive documents	45	4.49	1.308

I think it is easier submitting writing work using Google Drive documents.	45	4.87	1.1.20
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Frequencies of each response show that in each case (6) strongly agree was the most commonly selected response for each statement (see [Table 2](#)).

Table 2. Response frequencies

	1	2	3	4	5	6
I think it is easier writing in groups using Google Drive documents	0%	4.3%	17.4%	15.2%	28.3%	32.6%
I think it is easier to understand and read teacher comments using Google Drive documents	0%	6.5%	19.6%	21.7%	19.6%	30.4%
I think it is easier submitting writing work using Google Drive documents	0%	0%	17.4%	15.2%	28.3%	37%

Responses from the second survey attempted to gain deeper insight into student preferences. However, it should be noted that as only two responded, it is not possible to generalize these responses. Nonetheless, they may offer an interesting insight into student perceptions that can be further investigated in future research. Both respondents selected Google Docs as their preference in all three areas under investigation and elaborated on their choices. Their responses indicate that the affordances of Google Docs made it more convenient for these respondents during group writing (see sample comments below).

- Why did you prefer group writing with Google Docs?

複数のメンバーが同時にでき、その同期が簡単にできるから (You can have multiple members at the same time and easily synchronize them).

- Why did you prefer feedback and comments with essays done on Google Docs?

This is because its reply is online and it is easy to read anytime and anywhere on my smartphone.

- Why was it easiest to submit your group essays with Google Docs?

提出するためにファイルを移動する必要がなかったから (I didn't have to move the file to submit).

## 4. Discussion

Though it has previously been found that Japanese students still realize the need both academically and professionally for writing skills using standard technological tools (Jolley & Donnellan, 2018), more modern approaches have been found favorable in this investigation. It is surmised that this has to do with the reduced cognitive load that Google Docs affordances allow. Indeed, Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2014) also found that students reported a good impression of collaborative writing with Google Docs when completing writing tasks outside of the classroom. They further posited that their results indicate Google Docs could have successful applications within the classroom, just as this study found in terms of student perceptions. Furthermore, as in Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2014), it is recommended that instructors thoughtfully implement such methods when conducting class writing activities. Indeed, in the case of this study the instructor controlled all documents using Google Drive to help students focus on the task at hand. However, as students become more familiar with new writing tools, less scaffolding would obviously be needed.

## 5. Conclusions

Results from this study indicate that when undertaking group writing, students value tools that facilitate collaboration most conveniently. This is an important consideration for instructors when planning group writing in the L2 classroom. This convenience may help lessen the cognitive load required by groups, thus, allowing students to focus on the task at hand.

Overall, this is an exploratory study which requires further development and wider investigation. However, as Limbu and Markauskaite (2015) assert, it is important to consider students' experiences with different technologies, as it helps to understand the learning environment from the students' perspective. This in turn helps to not only inform instructor task implementation and planning, but also very importantly, to improve learning for students.

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